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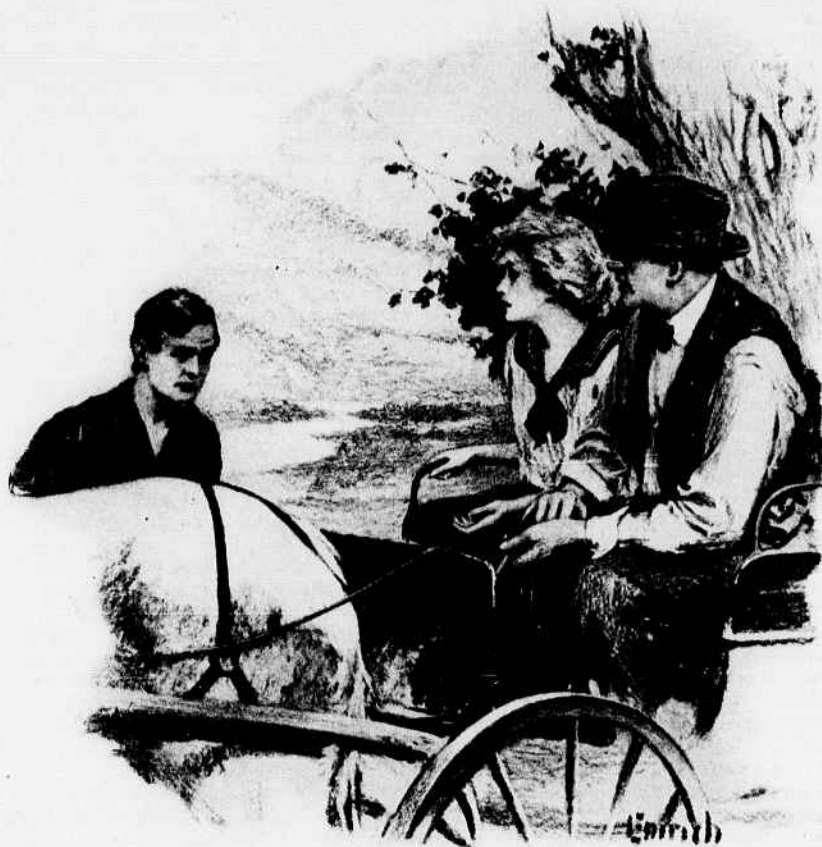
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The Fool-Maker

By OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

Illustration by Harvey Emrich



ANY man who says that the director of a moving picture company has a cinch passes up his chance of being father of his country.

Most people think that all a director has to do is to direct. They're dead wrong: that's the smallest task he has. He must be enough of a diplomat to conduct the peace negotiations in Europe; he must know every branch of theatricals, from four-a-day vaudeville to sunnyside burlesque; he must be photographer, clown, fictionist, artist, aviator, equestrian, meteorologist, and an expert on such subjects as optics, landscape-gardening, architecture, history, fashion, women, finance, and a million or so other things.

I'm thinking that if I'd known all that before they shipped me from the New Jersey studio down to Bat Cave, North Carolina, in charge of my own company, I probably shouldn't have accepted the commission.

Of course, I did have a good company under me—one of the best in the country: with Curly Locks and his wife, the famous Eunice Bailey, playing the stellar rôles—and Frank Tavis as my chief camera man. I'd just reached the point where I felt I could lean back in contentment when they sent little Doris Burroughs to do thrill stuff.

DORIS BURROUGHS was working in an acrobatic sister act on big-time vaudeville when our bunch got hold of her. She could do anything, from a back flip from standing position to a Gertrude Hoffman symphony in the air, hanging with her teeth.

She was little, lithe, blonde, vivacious, and pretty as could be, not as deep as the Atlantic Ocean, and the most outrageous flirt I've ever seen in my life.

I don't reckon there was any real harm in her devil-may-care make-up, and she didn't realize half the damage that she caused under various and sundry fifth ribs; but it was her boast that she could make a fool out of any man living—and she did. She had every man-jack in our company more or less wild about her, saving and excepting only Curly Locks, and he was still too engrossed with Eunice Bailey, his bride of six weeks, to pay attention to any other skirted being in the world.

But after Doris had been with us for a while we got a little bit tired of her continual flirting and the men began dropping her. The women never had cottoned to her much, although she didn't seem to realize that, and managed to be the life of every gathering we had.

THINGS were settling down into a pleasingly regular rut when I sent out a call for supes to take the big five-reeler, "The Moonshiner's Wife." And one of the first men to apply was Seth Twomley.

The minute I saw that man I knew I had a treasure for a supe, provided he didn't prove as awkward as he was handsome. And he certainly was handsome. But I must admit that all his good qualities were in his looks. Not that he had any bad ones, but he just didn't seem to have any. His head was made of solid ivory, and he was about as loquacious as a marble sarcophagus. But he was curious about movies, and that made him possible. Besides, it seems that he knew quite a few of the mountaineers, and he was a world of assistance in recruiting supes.

All well and good—until Doris spotted him and singled him out as her own especial prey. And when I saw that she had spotted him I realized that trouble was coming.

Seth just couldn't understand Doris. As a matter of fact, I don't believe he could understand anything much, he was

so dense. But I used to catch him scratching his head and puzzling over the various manners and kinds of ways in which Doris risked her life. One day I overheard him arguing with her. I eavesdropped principally because it was an unbelievable phenomenon to hear him talking at all.

"Hit hain't no sense f'r you-uns to do them thar fool things," he insisted earnestly.

"I get a big salary," she returned.

"Haow much?"

"Ten thousand dollars a year."

"No-o-o!"

"Yep."

He mulled over that for probably four minutes. Then:

"But hit hain't goin' t' do you-uns no good after you-uns is dead."

I peeped around my tree as I heard Doris's laugh ripple out, and I saw her lean close to him, look up at him dazlingly, and lean confidently against his knee.

"You great big, dear, silly man!" she gurgled.

I groaned.

"Mister Twomley," I remarked to myself, "she has your number catalogued and safe in her little booklet."

I grew nervous about it. I don't know whether all these stories you read about the North Carolina mountaineers are true or not; but I do know that I didn't have any right to think that they weren't true, and I decided to play it safe. It'd have been a sweet thing to run into if Doris made Seth good and sore, and then he did some of this kidnapping stuff, and—No, sir, I wasn't butting into any lonesome pine trails in search of an abducted thrill-woman!

SO I cornered Doris and had it out with her—paternal-like.

"Doris," I said earnestly, "I'm not an eavesdropper, but I happened to witness your courtship of that big boob Twomley out there under the trees near Laurel Mountain, and I'm warning you that you're playing with fire."

She looked me squarely in the eyes, and burst into a gale of merriment.

"Ain't he a scream?" she giggled. "Ain't he just simply a sugar-dear and the biggest laugh ever?"

"Maybe—and then again maybe not. Did it ever occur to you that he might take you seriously?"

"No!" Her big brown eyes opened wide.

"Yes. He looks up to you, true; but he's getting it through his noodle that you're in love with him, and therefore—well, these mountaineers generally get what they go after."

She fairly sparkled.

"You don't think he'd kidnap me—really?"

"Yes, I do."

With that she clapped her hands like a child with a new toy.

"How grand! What an experience that would be!"

WHAT can you do with a kid like that? I terminated the interview with a solemn warning:

"Remember, Doris, whatever happens is up to you. And please think of me, too. Seth Twomley controls my supes, and they're the best bunch I've ever had. If he gets sore at you they'll all jump the job—and me with half a dozen pictures just part finished. Besides, I'm thinking first of all of your safety."

She stepped back and surveyed me critically.

"You know," she remarked, with characteristic naïveté, "if you weren't such a crusty old bachelor I'd kiss you!"

"I ain't—"

But she skipped out of the room with a kiss of the hand.

"Some day," she trilled. "Maybe."

Last thing I saw of her was when she joined Seth Twomley under the trees and strolled with him toward Crystal Spring.

A week passed—two—three. Then, one morning when I went to rehearse a few big scenes in "The Moonshiner's Wife,"—for the picture was giving me a world of trouble and I'd stopped it sev-